# Message from the Director - February 2006

As we honor African-American history month in the National Park Service, I would like to reflect on a number of events from which I have gained a great deal of inspiration over the past few weeks.

At the beginning of February I joined nearly 10,000 people, including President Bush and First Lady Laura Bush, along with former Presidents Bush, Clinton and Carter, to honor Coretta Scott King at her funeral at New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Lithonia, GA. Many of National Park Service employees were also in attendance at the funeral, which followed a day of tributes - with nearly 170,000 mourners -- at the Historic Ebenezer Baptist Church located an NPS facility.

Mrs. King was an extraordinary woman; a beacon of strength to the world, and a friend to the National Park Service. It was truly a moving experience to see and hear the passion in the voices of those who came to pay their respects. I offer my heartfelt thanks to the many NPS employees who worked so hard and contributed so much of their time during the days of viewing and the funeral. Their efforts enabled visitors to pay their respects to Mrs. King safely and with dignity.

To honor African-American history, I this month will also visit the Frederick Douglass home, the Nicodemus National Historic Site, and attend the designation of 2 new units to the system that will pay tribute to the contributions of African-Americans. I will share reflections on those events, and details of the new units, in next month's column.

There are a number of other events going on at national parks across the country in honor of African-American History Month. Detailed information can be obtained at <a href="http://www.nps.gov/pub">http://www.nps.gov/pub</a> aff/african am/celebrate.htm.

At the end of last month, I was also enriched and inspired as I attended the National Park System Advisory Board's "Scholars Forum," which included enlightening and remarkable presentations from a diverse group of scholars and eminent historians on interpretation and education in our parks.

The National Park System has been called "America's greatest university without walls." It includes some of the world's most magnificent landscapes, a rich diversity of plant and animal life, some of the finest examples of American culture, and historic objects and places that reflect the most important events in American history. Through our educational and interpretive programming we give voice to the narratives and meanings of our parks. I believe there is an opportunity to enhance this core mission by attracting a new level of public interest in the role parks play in telling America's story.

Reflecting on the current state of historical literacy and civic participation in our country, the scholars talked with the National Leadership Council, representatives of our National Education Council and other NPS leaders about civic engagement and the place of parks in our nation's educational systems about how NPS education can foster civic awareness, reflection and responsibility.

As educators, each of the scholars discussed how people learn, and the enormous value of parks as sites for place-based learning. They spoke of parks as special venues where people encounter the natural world and the past in fresh, sometimes unexpected ways. They lauded national parks as ideal places to train teachers. They affirmed parks' potential to imbue learners with optimism about the ability of individuals to make a difference, and about nature's renewing potential. They spoke about parks as places that affirm cherished ideas, ideals, and stories, and that also provoke questions and expose visitors to unfamiliar perspectives, where it is supremely important to acknowledge that we, as a great democratic nation, are in a never-ending struggle to live up to "very demanding standards."

The group also discussed how parks are ideal places to help students and others gain deeper understanding of American history, and how it has shaped the issues we now face as a nation. As a result, interpreting the past is a key part of NPS efforts to achieve "21st century relevancy," which is one of our Legacy Goals.

Among principal messages from the group: there is a unique and important role that the national parks can and should play as civic educator; education of the nation's youth is a national priority; the NPS should take greater advantage of new technologies for programming and outreach; there is a growing public appetite for civil discussion and exchange and the national parks should be places to offer such opportunities; in telling America's story, there is not one single static and non-controversial "truth," and we should strive for truthfulness, using sound scholarship and attending to multiple viewpoints; there is a great deal of "craft" required for success in offering this kind of interpretation; the NPS must become self-reflective about whom we have served best, and who has been underserved in the parks, and why, historically, has that happened; and, finally, with the implicit obligation to inform the public about the importance of the resources we are protecting, education is integral to what we do, and the NPS can not be limited in its interpretation of park purposes to enabling legislation.

Listening to and talking with this group of prominent educators, we are inspired anew and reminded again that national parks are greatly-revered and the National Park Service much-admired. We are an institution with a unique and vital role to play in telling America's story and nurturing an informed citizenry - a mission of high national purpose. I want to broaden the dialogue sparked by the Scholars Forum to engage managers and interpreters-all employees-across the Service, and to that end we will manage a series of TEL interactive broadcasts beginning in April and May. This is a discussion fundamentally about park purposes and prospects looking to the future. It points us in directions we want to explore in the context of planning for the Service's Centennial in 2016, and developing a vision of the kind of organization we aspire to become in our second century.

I would like to extend my thanks to scholars, and to all of the NPS employees who participated in the event. (List of scholars attached).

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